

Special Analysis

COLOMBIA: Opium Poppy Cultivation on the Increase

A significant expansion of opium poppy cultivation during the past year has accompanied increased Colombian drug trafficker interest in the international heroin market. Although production potential is still small by global market standards, at the current rate of expansion opium cultivation in Colombia could exceed the total from Mexico and Guatemala—the principal Latin American opium producers—by the end of next year.

Scattered, small-scale opium poppy cultivation has been noted in Colombia for more than a decade.

most entrepreneurs involved are midlevel cocaine traffickers, the major cartels may be moving in.

Heroin production in Colombia is still minor and the quality is variable, but the cartels may be getting ready to carve out a niche in the US market if heroin use increases, as Colombian traffickers believe may occur over the next few years.

The development of a production capability now would allow them to rapidly exploit any expansion, and an indigenous opium source would let them control the cycle from acquisition of the raw material to final distribution.

Senior Colombian officials are concerned about the potential threat of the heroin trade but have yet to choose an avenue of attack. Bogota claims to have manually eradicated some 1,300 hectares of poppies, but this approach diverts large numbers of police and military from other counternarcotics and security operations. Moreover, most fields are replanted after government forces leave.

The government fears that traffickers will exploit environmental concerns caused by large-scale spraying, possibly creating a political backlash.

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COLOMBIA: Opium-Poppy Cultivation Expanding

[redacted] in Colombia are now devoted to opium cultivation, making it the largest grower in the Western Hemisphere, although the total could be significantly greater [redacted]

[redacted] The large profits derived from poppy cultivation have enticed both first-time and experienced narcotics growers, according to various sources. President Gaviria is committed to destroying poppy cultivation, even at the cost of diverting critical assets from cocaine interdiction. The National Police have sprayed 3,400 hectares of poppy fields in the first three months of this year as compared with 1,145 hectares for all of last year. [redacted]

Comment: Bogota will continue aggressive poppy eradication, although it probably will ask Washington to increase counternarcotics aid to help maintain cocaine interdiction efforts. Growers and traffickers will respond by replanting, reducing field size, intercropping with legal agriculture, and firing on spray aircraft. Because poppies can be easily and quickly replanted in sprayed fields and because a single field can produce three crops a year, an aggressive year-round eradication effort is essential for control. [redacted]